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## Guidelines for Special Issues Training Sessions in Secondary School Peer Counselling Programs

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### Abstract

This article examines the growing trend of special issues training sessions for peer counsellors. The author describes a number of training guidelines developed as a result of the Victoria Peer Counselling Centre's 1985 training program and a formal evaluation of three sessions in that program. The suggested guidelines include training in basic listening and helping skills, extended practice of these skills into special issues sessions, mutual decision-making as to which special issues will be given priority; peer counsellor input into the activities used in training; and a strong emphasis on experiential activities. The author urges trainers to closely monitor the learning experiences of each trainee, and to provide follow-up support when special issues trigger intense personal feelings for any individual. Finally, trainers must ensure that peer counsellors understand the importance of their role, particularly in cases where they must make immediate referrals.

### Résumé

Cet article examine les problèmes spécifiques à l'entraînement des conseillers par les pairs. L'auteur décrit des lignes directrices développées à partir du programme d'entraînement au "Victoria Peer Counselling Centre," en 1985, et présente une évaluation formelle de trois des sessions de ce programme. Les lignes directrices suggérées comprennent l'entraînement des habiletés de base à l'écoute et à l'aide, une pratique supplémentaire de ces habiletés à l'intérieur de sessions à contenu spécifique, une prise de décision mutuelle basée sur lequel des points abordés semble être prioritaire; l'opinion des conseillers par les pairs concernant les activités utilisées lors de la session d'entraînement; et une emphase toute spéciale sur la pratique des différentes habiletés à l'intérieur des activités. L'auteur presse les entraîneurs de suivre de près l'apprentissage de chacun des apprenants, et d'offrir un suivi à l'individu pour qui une situation spéciale aurait soulevé des émotions personnelles intenses. Finalement, les entraîneurs doivent s'assurer que les conseillers par les pairs comprennent l'importance de leur rôle, particulièrement dans le cas où celui-ci se doit de référer l'individu immédiatement.

In the past several years, increasing numbers of peer counselling programs have been developed in schools across Canada and the United States. Several reasons have contributed to this growth: student peer counsellors help bridge the gap between adults and the peer culture; they provide an outreach approach to counselling, increasing counselling service availability and referral; and they function as positive role models for other students. In addition, peer counsellors gain a great deal themselves from their training and experience in helping other students. Their self-esteem, personal awareness and communication skills all improve (Saunders, 1983).

As more peer counselling programs develop and as trainers become more comfortable on the basic skills level, both trainers and peer counsellors often seek additional information and training in special

issues such as suicide, grieving and death, sexually transmitted diseases, alcohol and other drugs and family relationships. However, because of the sensitivity and skill required to help young people cope effectively with these issues, many peer program leaders may be less confident about training in these areas. Some professionals may believe peer counsellors should not receive training in controversial topics. They may think these areas should be left exclusively to professionals. However, peer counsellors are eager to help their peers and they can be trained to play a significant role in assisting others in coping with sensitive issues. This paper details the training guidelines necessary for helping peer counsellors become involved with special issues.

In August 1985, 18 grade eleven and twelve students from two secondary schools in Victoria received training in basic listening and helping skills at the recently established Peer Counselling Centre (de Rosenroll, 1986; Carr, 1988). Throughout the year, these students attended continuing sessions which dealt with a number of special issues including grieving, depression and suicide. The objectives of the three training sessions were to increase peer counsellors' understanding of grieving, depression and suicide in their own lives and in the lives of others; and to assist peer counsellors in becoming more comfortable and effective in responding to students who are dealing with these issues.

These special sessions were evaluated as part of a Master's degree project at the University of Victoria (Gilmore, 1986). Several measures were used in the evaluation. These included questionnaires after each session, a general follow-up questionnaire, four pre-test/post-test instruments administered to the program group and a non-equivalent control group, and detailed recording of the program implementation. The results showed that the goals and objectives of the program were achieved.

As a result of the year's entire series of special issues training sessions, and the formal evaluation of the sessions on grieving, depression and suicide, the following guidelines have been developed. They are presented here in the hope that they will be useful to peer counsellor trainers in the planning of their own special issues training sessions.

#### *Focus on Basic Helping Skills*

Before special issues are introduced, peer counsellors must receive a solid training (30 hours minimum) in basic listening and helping skills. Many written resources are available to assist in this basic training. *The Peer Counsellor Starter Kit* (Carr & Saunders, 1979) outlines a series of training sessions in basic listening and helping skills as well as providing information and an annotated bibliography of further materials valuable to the prospective trainer. *Youth Helping Youth: A Handbook for Training Peer Facilitators* (Myrick & Erney, 1979) and the companion student hand-

book, *Caring and Sharing: Becoming a Peer Facilitator* (Myrick & Erney, 1978), also provide detailed explanations for starting a peer counsellor program and carrying out basic skills training.

After students have received a solid basic skills training, it is valuable to increase their knowledge, personal awareness and comfort level concerning special issues which they are most likely to meet in working with other students.

Basic skills practice should not end, however. When special issues are introduced they can be considered most effective when used as vehicles for further practice and discussion of basic skills. Among student suggestions for program improvement on the post questionnaires were comments like "centre suicide more around our communication skills that we learned in the summer."

### *Selection of Special Issues*

Peer counsellors will learn most from special sessions if they decide as a group which issues are most important to consider. Both trainer and trainees may make suggestions and the group can discuss them. The rationale supporting each session should be clear, and the peer counsellors should be able to perceive and express a need for a particular area. For example, in determining the special session focus for the Victoria peer counsellors, the students recognized that loss and grieving experiences occur in the lives of all students. Students may experience the death of a friend or family member, parental separation or divorce, the change or break-up of a relationship, failure at school, a move to a new neighbourhood and/or school, loss of "innocence" (physical or psychological), change in physical appearance or illness. The thoughts and feelings involved in the grieving process occur for any kind of loss. On the grieving post-session questionnaire, one peer counsellor responded, "Some of the things that were said tonight, I found were feelings I had when I was pregnant — denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance — these things I felt without even knowing it." Learning how loss affects students and which reactions from others are most helpful is clearly valuable for peer counsellors. To ensure that the session emphasizes the many experiences which may involve grieving, trainees can be asked to create an extensive list of these experiences by brainstorming, and then discussing how the grieving process was involved in their personal reactions to these experiences. This process helped to confirm this topic as an important issue for this student community.

Another method for selecting a special issue emerges from data gathered in or from the community. For example, the number of adolescent suicides in Canada has increased by 230 per cent during the last 15 years (Victoria *Times-Colonist*, October 27, 1985). A local psychiatric nurse hired to follow up adolescent suicide attempts in greater Victoria hospitals averaged one referral a day from mid-September to

the end of October 1985 (*Victoria Times-Colonist*, October 27, 1985). Since students almost always give signals before committing suicide, peer counsellors can be trained to recognize these signals and respond appropriately. Peer counsellors help by decreasing the isolation of the potentially suicidal student and alerting professionals to the danger.

Although training sessions for a number of issues may be scheduled in advance, it is important to remain open to developing special sessions as these issues are experienced. Peer counsellors will learn more effectively after they have experienced the issue in their work with other students. Certain issues such as study skills are likely to arise at certain times of the year. The trainer can anticipate this and be partially prepared should such a session be requested.

In addition to the issue covered in the Victoria Peer Counselling Centre program, possible issues for consideration include: getting along with teachers, relating to parents and siblings, building self-esteem, improving body image, drug and alcohol abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, sexual assault including date rape, using community resources, developing a drop-in centre, orientation of the first year students, giving information sessions at feeder schools, assertiveness training, stress management and looking at loneliness. Many other issues may develop as important in the experiences of the peer counsellors and their trainers.

#### *Activities Included in Training Sessions*

A variety of activities can be used to create the most effective sessions. Peer counsellors should have input into the planning process. They may, for instance, decide to invite a guest from the community (doctor, minister, psychologist, etc.) who has special insight into a certain issue. The trainer should help ensure that this person is carefully chosen for his or her expertise in the area and his or her ability to work with students. Mini-lectures, discussions with the entire group or smaller groups, "go-rounds" giving each person a chance to speak, and a variety of role plays with careful debriefing can be combined to create one session. In some situations audio and video-tapes can be used for demonstration purposes and for practice. The level of risk in making practice tapes can be reduced by having very small groups of students debrief any tapes made.

Field trips to various community resource centres may be valuable. For instance, after a visit to the family planning clinic, peer counsellors will be able to give more concrete help by actually accompanying students there and preparing them in advance for the procedure they will encounter.

#### *Importance of an Experiential Element*

Whatever activities are included in special issues sessions, it is especially important to emphasize experiential approaches. Presentation of facts

and theories in isolation should be limited. When students were asked what was least useful in the special training sessions, replies included “the theory part . . . I forgot most of it,” and “information written on the board.”

Opportunities to share personal experiences and relate these to the ideas presented are valuable. Through these discussions peer counsellors create personal meaning of the theories and facts involved in the issue. On the follow-up questionnaire, students specified that the most useful parts of the sessions were the group discussions of people’s personal experiences.

Role play activities will help students to experience what it is really like to relate to a fellow student about the specific issue at hand. On the evaluation follow-up questionnaires, ten of eleven students indicated that they thought role plays would be worthwhile in the training sessions. Careful debriefing of these role plays is extremely important so that peer counsellors can share experiences and deal with questions which arise.

#### *Considering the Needs of Each Trainee*

It is important that the trainer remain aware of what each trainee is experiencing during the session. Some sessions will trigger personal issues for students which may need further individual attention when the session is completed. The trainer should always remind students that he or she is available after the sessions and should also be available for individual students if there is any indication that this is needed.

Each student should have an opportunity to participate in the session in ways most valuable for him or her. This does not mean that each student need be equally vocal. However, if a few students participate much more vocally than others, the trainer should consider what the quieter participants are experiencing. In the specific sessions evaluated, one student who claimed to be quiet said, “I like to sit back and absorb everything that is being said.” However, other students reported, “Everything I was going to say was being said,” and “I sometimes feel uncomfortable talking in large groups.” The last two responses suggest that programming changes might improve the students’ training experience.

Approaches which help all students to feel involved include small group exercises (two, three, or four students depending on the level of risk involved) and “go-rounds” in which each person in turn has a chance to comment. On the follow-up questionnaire, when asked if “go-rounds” should be included in sessions, nine students replied “yes,” one student replied “no” and one said “not sure.” Two students made a point of suggesting “go-rounds” on earlier questionnaires. Two students specifically suggested more small group discussions.

It is also important that the actual training group be kept small (12 students maximum) so that no trainee “gets lost” during full group activities.

### *Emphasizing the Important Role of Peer Counsellors in Referral Situations*

In most peer counselling programs, guidelines exist for immediate referral of some issues to the school counsellor. Some of the special issues dealt with in training sessions may be among those which require immediate referral. If this is the case, it is important that peer counsellors understand the importance of their role even if they must refer. A few students reported their training was less useful for issues where referral was necessary. Peer counsellors need to understand the importance of their making the initial contact and thereby insuring that the student gets help. The effectiveness of their initial contact may well influence how open the student is to other help. Also, the peer counsellor's continuing support after the referral has been made is extremely important to the student. These factors should be discussed in training sessions and also reinforced as individual referrals occur. In each referral case, the trainer should be involved in continued consultation with the individual peer counsellor concerning ways in which he or she can be most helpful.

## CONCLUSION

It is hoped that the above guidelines, developed as a result of experiences through the 1985 Victoria Peer Counselling Centre training program and the formal evaluation of three special issues sessions in that program, give other peer counsellor trainers or prospective trainers some “food for thought” to use along with their own experiences in planning future training programs.

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